

“In what sense could “*They was follow by the man*” be ok?”⁵

RODRÍGUEZ, SILVINA

ZINKGRÄF MAGDALENA

Abstract

In this paper we analyse the recurrent mistakes produced by primary-school Spanish-speaking children learning English in two tasks designed to research the acquisition of passive constructions and unaccusative⁶ verbs. The regularity and systematicity with which they occur and the directionality in terms of preference for a particular incorrect form (White, 2003) point to stages in their developing IL systems and reveal that the different subsystems of learners’ IL grammar interact in the path until each structure is fully acquired.

1. Context

Our research was carried out in a private primary school context where the teaching/learning environment resembles an English-as-a-Second-Language setting because of the three 50-minute periods taught every afternoon. The school provides students with an English-all-around atmosphere, which ensures ample

⁵ This paper presents results obtained within the Research Project (J014), *Estructuras tempranas y tardías en el desarrollo del lenguaje*, subsidised by Universidad Nacional del Comahue.

⁶ Unaccusative verbs denote non-agentive events, like *exist*, or a change of state, like *fall* and *bloom*. They take only one argument, the role of which is that of “theme” or “patient”. Like in passive constructions, this argument behaves as the syntactic subject of the sentence (although semantically it is not).

opportunities for learners to be exposed to the foreign language and use it naturally and purposefully. Thus, instances of structures, lexical bundles, discourse markers and organisers are part of the input they receive, which eventually leads to unconscious and implicit acquisition.

2. Methodology

2.1. Objectives

The aim of the research was to study the acquisition of both unaccusative verbs and passive constructions and explore the difficulties participants experienced at an early stage in their learning process.

2.2. Participants

Twelve 5th graders were asked to participate in the study. Subjects' mean age is 9; 7, ranging between 9 and 12. Seven of the participants were girls and 4, boys. They have been learning English for 2 to 9 years (mean: 5). During the oral task, however, only 11 students were present (the twelfth dropped English lessons).

2.3. Data gathering procedures

The experimental design included a written and an oral task that would complement each other in the type of data gathered: while the written task (WT) would provide researchers with information on learners' use of passive truncated and/or full constructions and unaccusative verbs in a controlled setting, the oral task (OT) would show more spontaneous language use, even when some prompts were given. The WT was administered during one period in the afternoon and the OT took place one week later on two different days due to the number of children to be interviewed.

2.3.1. The written elicited production task

The verbs selected for this task, which have been grouped below, were presented in two conditions each: a) plural subject + singular object (*The boy and the girl pushed Tom*) and b) singular subject + plural object (*The boy found Tom and his sister*). As can be noted, two of the verbs were irregular and the other two were regular.

Passive constructions		Unaccusative verbs		
follow	bite	arrive	appear	fall
find	push	leave	melt	float

Subjects in the cases of the verbs *follow* and *find* varied according to the feature [+/- human] (*The cat found the parrot and the bird*). For obvious reasons the verb *bite* was used only with animals as subjects and objects.

Each of the unaccusative verbs was illustrated in a picture. The structure was supposed to shed light on what learners knew about word order in the use of unaccusative verbs, since in English they always follow the syntactic subject (unlike Spanish where the order can be SV or VS.) To this purpose, participants were given a copy of the task which included 18 test items organised into three types of activities (see sample in Appendix A):

- 1) Transform 12 sentences in the active voice (describing an accompanying picture) into its passive counterpart starting each sentence with the given subject and using the appropriate form of the verb in brackets.
- 2) Answer the question "What's going on?" to describe the situation in the adjoining picture making use of the unaccusative verb provided.
- 3) Write a possible L1 version for each of their answers (passives and unaccusatives) to ensure participants' understanding of the situation and show their L1 knowledge of the structures.

The time allotted for the task was 50 minutes, with some learners handing in earlier.

2.3.2. The elicited imitation oral task

Participants listened to two sets of 5 and 6 situations respectively described by one researcher while looking at some pictures illustrating the actions (see Appendix B). After each stretch, learners retold the events when they were shown the corresponding picture. Before the test proper, participants were taught how the elicited imitation task worked with three additional verbs that were not unaccusative (*sleep, eat and kick*).

Learners were interviewed one at a time during approximately 10 minutes and their responses were recorded with an mp3. Even though the task is characterised as "imitation", participants are actually producing spontaneous language prompted by the picture and the auditory stimuli given by the interviewer earlier. Because participants needed to have looked at one whole set of pictures and listened to the interviewer's description before turning to their own production, the time elapsed between the stimulus and their response was long enough for them not to be able to "imitate" the stimulus unless equipped with the language to do so. Learners' production was elicited through the question "What's going on here/in this picture?" The verbs selected for this task were ***melt, fall, float, slip, arrive, appear, stand, fly, leave/ go home, break*** (2) and *live* (those in bold-face type were also used in the written task).

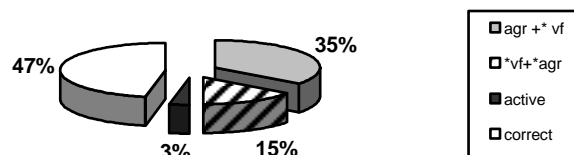
3. Results and discussion

3.1. The written elicited production task

The answers in this task indicate that participants know both structures, even though the passive voice had not been taught formally and explicitly at the time of the experiment.

3.1.1. The use of the passive voice

141 sentences containing a passive construction were produced, out of which 42, 55% were correct. The remaining answers presented inaccuracies of various types⁷ (see Graph 1 below).



Graph 1.: Distribution of responses for the passive construction

Careful analysis of these categories reveals that two subgroups contain agreement inaccuracies (*agr + vf and *vf+*agr), the sum of which is 22, 68%. Only two participants misused a plural form of the auxiliary verb accompanying a singular subject (the Spanish version indicating a correct passive interpretation), while in all other cases, a singular form of *be* follows a plural subject, as in (4) and (5):

(4)**Paul and his sister was found.*

(5)**The parrot and the bird was find.*

As regards incorrect verb forms, the results show that both *follow* and *bite* presented equal percentages of mistakes (50% of the answers given for them). Bearing in mind that *bite* – *bit* – *bitten* are lexically unknown words, it is quite unexpected to find the same percentage of error in a regular verb as *follow*. Three participants consistently made mistakes in the verb forms of both verbs, always resorting to the bare infinitive form. Five other participants produced incorrect forms of *follow*, while four produced incorrect forms of *bite*, always choosing the same form. While some learners appeared not to doubt as regards verb form and systematically chose an incorrect one, others selected either one or the other alternatively. This variability might be directly related to the fact that in their interlanguages both forms might coexist and compete, indicating an unstable IL grammar at this stage.

3.1.2. The use of unaccusative verbs

Against our predictions, participants in general did not use the six unaccusative verbs correctly (36,70%) and only *arrive* and *leave* obtained 50% of correct answers. Most of the inaccuracies encountered involve an auxiliary verb accompanied by either an incorrect form of the main verb as in (6), where a past form appears, or in (7), where the participant has resorted to an infinitive form.

(6)**The peoples are arrived the house*

(7)**The ice-cream is melt.*

⁷ Since the structure had not been taught, productions presented the agent as introduced by many prepositions different from *by*. These mistakes exceed the scope of our paper.

These mistakes seem to respond to attempted progressive tenses in that both types include the auxiliary *be*. Another important source of inaccuracy lies in the agreement between subject and auxiliary verb or main verb. The data indicate a significant tendency towards the use of singular forms of auxiliary *be* and bare infinitive forms of main verbs when compound verb tenses are attempted.

(8) *They leave of [sic] the house.*

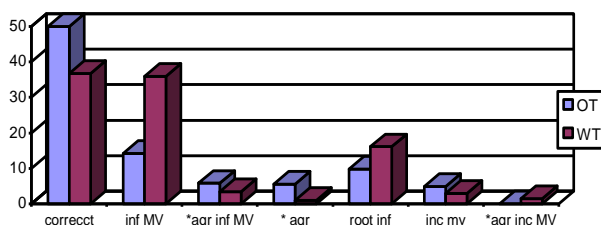
(9) **The moon appear.*

In fact, when participants did not use the progressive tense, they resorted to structures involving plural subjects like (8) to produce correct sentences. Three participants who used unaccusatives as in (8) also answered one or two questions as in (9). Thus, sentences like (8) might have been unintentionally made correct by inserting what White (2003) terms “a default form”, i.e. one that substitutes for others (p.196), which some of these learners use at this stage due to its similarity to the form in (9) and the root infinitive form. This default form appears to be their choice in sentences like (7) when unable to select the correct *-ing* participle to form a progressive tense or to indicate present simple form for the 3rd person singular as in (9).

Despite the numerous errors made when using unaccusative verbs, there is no single instance in the data of transitivity of the verb (attaching a direct object to it), or of VSO word order, typical of and acceptable in their L1 (*Salió la luna*) but characteristically incorrect in English (**Appeared the moon*). These findings clearly reveal participants’ knowledge of the use of this type of verbs, the problems they may be experiencing with the necessary morphological processes relative to inflection and verb forms as well as their strategies to overcome these obstacles from the structures and forms available in their interlanguages.

3.2. The oral task

Because of the unexpectedly large number of morphological mistakes found in the written task with respect to the use of unaccusative verbs⁸, an experiment was carried out in order to get participants to produce these verbs in a less controlled situation. In the oral task (OT) participants in general successfully produced the expected verbs and when their memory or knowledge of the verb failed, they resorted to other unaccusative verbs available in their lexicons. While some of the errors that appeared in the written task (WT) were also recorded in the oral data, this was the case to a much lesser degree, as shown in Graph 2.



Graph 2.: Distribution of responses per task

⁸ Since the passive voice had not been explicitly taught in the L2 classroom, such a large number of mistakes was expected for passive constructions but not for unaccusatives.

The comparison reveals that at the oral task participants were, on the whole, more accurate in their production of unaccusative verbs. The percentages of the No-agreement (*agr) category, *agr + infinitive form of the main verb (*agr inf MV) and incorrect form of the main verb (Inc MV) appear to have slightly increased in the oral task, although the difference is not significant. Instances of the infinitive form of the main verb, as in example (5), appear to have reduced by more than half.

For both tasks the percentage of use of the progressive tense is similar (45,8 % in the oral task and 56% for the written), but the contrast lies in the distribution of answers in this tense across participants: the eleven participants in the oral task produced at least one correct instance of the present progressive tense (some learners providing 4, 5 and even 7), whereas in the written task only three out of twelve learners used it accurately. Moreover, correct answers in the deferred imitation task were also expressed in a variety of other tenses used correctly: 30% are like those in (8), 7% are 3rd person singular simple present instances and the remaining 17% are instances of the simple past tense, which had not so far appeared.

4. Conclusion and implications for language teaching

The mistakes observed in the two structures and across tasks are clustered around the forms chosen for the auxiliary verb and for the main verb. In the former, learners mostly tend to use the singular form with a plural subject, mainly in the simple past tense (*was*) for the written task, and in the present for the oral task (*is*). As regards the main verb, participants show a marked preference for the bare infinitive form, instead of the past participle, in passive sentences, and instead of the -ing form, in unaccusative progressive constructions. These choices reveal that some morphological aspects are lagging behind in L2 acquisition. There is reason to believe that eventually these participants may be able to accurately retrieve inflected verb forms, since most of them have successfully used them at least once.

The regularity and systematicity with which these errors occur and the directionality in terms of preference for a particular incorrect form (White, 2003) provide an insight into these learners' real competence, pointing to stages in their developing IL systems. While it is no news that the acquisition of these structures will take some time to be accurately produced, there is evidence to claim that word order appears to be acquired earlier than morphology, since no word order errors were observed. A second claim that can be made is that the different subsystems of learners' IL grammar seem to interact until each structure is fully acquired. Learners' auxiliary system develops concurrently with verbal morphology, not *after* or *before* it as much teaching and many textbooks would seem to assume. This strengthens the claim that language acquisition is not a linear process, and changes in one part of the grammatical system (for example, gaining knowledge of the passive voice) will necessarily affect the rest. The fact that learners show inconsistencies and great variability in the use of auxiliaries and verbal morphology at a pre-intermediate level would indicate that formal instruction in the form of explicit teaching (by way of intensive practice, explanation and over-correction) may not lead to implicit knowledge directly. However, correct instances of passive constructions prove that formal instruction is not of essence to the development of implicit knowledge, which is intuitive since the learner "is unlikely to be aware of having ever learnt and is probably unaware of its existence" (Ellis, 1997:111).

On the basis of the data obtained, we can assert that responses like the one in the title, “*They was follow by the girl”, are evidence of some of the typical steps in L2 acquisition, according to the literature and could be considered “right” because they evince how the word order rules typically governing L2 structures are respected. Besides, these responses (and the variability found across tasks for one same participant) indicate that learners are aware of the need for a certain inflected form of the verb, which on occasions they cannot retrieve. The fact that they sometimes make use of this correct finite form points to its availability in their interlanguage, which may or may not be accessed at different times (Ellis, 1997: 67). The two structures studied in our experiments interact with one another and affect the way each of them is produced, as reflected by the similarities found in the errors across structure.

As foreign language acquisition researchers, there is evidence for us to claim that participants in our studies have knowledge of the passive voice and of the use of unaccusative verbs. As EFL teachers, we cannot, however, overlook the fact that sentences like the one in the title are inaccurate. And in our roles of teachers, we will be faced with the task of assessing our learners’ performance in the target language, and will eventually deduct points in formal tests due to this type of inaccuracies. Yet, as we have shown through the analysis of the data, these errors are good signs of the typical acquisition process of passives and unaccusatives.

One further issue to be raised relates to the approach to teaching English. The relatively important percentage of correct (as well as the attempted incorrect) instances of passive structures obtained from the written elicited production task in this English-all-around environment lends support to the claim that the provision of input resembling that of a native-like setting contributes to implicit knowledge of certain structures, even if these have not been taught formally. In due course, however, instruction will be needed to make learners “consciously attend to the formal properties of the input” (Ellis, 1997: 116).

References

- White, L. (2003) *Second Language Acquisition and Universal Grammar*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge
- Ellis, R. (1997) *SLA Research and Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press: Hong Kong

Appendix A: The Written Elicitation Task

2



The boy and the girl pushed Tom. (push – pushed – pushed)

Tom

.....

Versión en castellano

.....

3



The boy found Tom and his sister (find – found – found)

Tom and his sister

.....

Versión en castellano

.....

Appendix B: The Oral elicited Imitation Task

1. Oh look! The ice-cream is melting.
2. How nice! The eggs are breaking
Three chicks are born.
3. Oh, no! The yellow pig is slipping and it's falling into the water.
4. The other pigs are jumping into the water too.
And look! The pigs are floating, they are not sinking.
5. The tree has got so many apples that ... look! One branch is breaking.